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ABSTRACT

This newsletter reports the results of a study that explored the relationship between the organizational culture of secondary schools and students' progress, that is success, failure, and dropout. Three secondary schools were examined in the study, and the results showed that the organizational culture of schools is a useful concept for understanding schools as a "living environment." The three case studies supported the initial hypothesis that a strong organizational culture including shared values and goals, dynamism, commitment, and participation is related to better academic results and lower failure and dropout rates. A summary chart of the three schools' cultures is presented. School culture indicators presented on the chart are: introduction to the school, administration, curriculum, socio-economic environment, history of the school, prevailing human and educational values, team spirit and conflict resolution, evidence of the school's cultural life, sense of belonging and satisfaction, nicknaming and interpersonal relations, school image, leadership, educational project, academic progress, students' opinion about their school, and data of the Quebec Department of Education. (WP)

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BULLETIN

ED 383 419

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Organizational Culture of Secondary Schools and Students' Academic Progress

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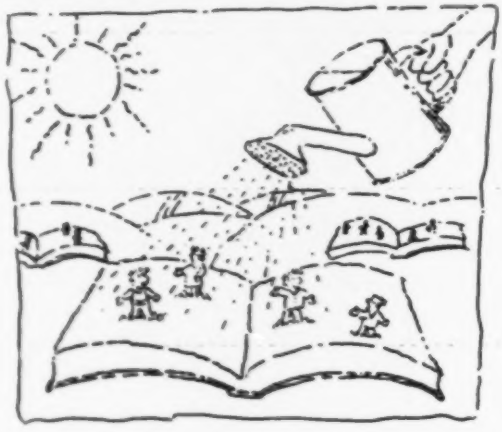
This newsletter gives an account of a study conducted by Claude Deblois and Lise Corriveau at CRIRES (Centre for Research and Intervention for Academic Achievement). The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between the organizational culture of secondary schools and students' progress, that is success and failure and dropout. Given that the theoretical underpinnings regarding this subject are weak and that research on the subject is still in its early stages, it was necessary to define the notion of organizational culture and to establish appropriate analytical frameworks. Three secondary schools were chosen for the purpose of this study. The results showed that the organizational culture of schools is a useful concept for understanding schools as a "living environment". Moreover, the three case studies supported the initial hypothesis that a strong organizational culture is related to better academic results and lower failure and dropout rates. Major findings of the study are presented below, thanks to a grant from the Québec Ministère de l'Éducation.



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Organizational Culture of Schools

Presently, Québec, like other industrialized societies, faces two major problems, that is, the restricted efficiency of its school system and the high rate of failure and dropout. Several social, family and economic factors can partly account for the academic progress of students as it relates to success, as well as to failure or dropout. Recent studies have focused on the influence of the school on student performance. According to an American study, this factor was cited by 51% of boys and 33% of girls who had dropped out of school as the reason for having given up their studies. Family and economic reasons ranked second and third.

Research on the contribution of schools to the academic performance of students has, among other things, examined the climate and effectiveness of schools. It has been observed that students perform best in schools with a "participatory" climate at all levels and where high but realistic expectations for students are held. This is also true for schools where positive behaviour on the part of students is encouraged, where the administration shows strong leadership, where basic subjects are greatly stressed and where there is a consensus on the objectives pursued.

Other factors may also increase a school's effectiveness. Factors identified include the following: involvement of all staff in the achievement of high and clearly defined goals; encouragement from the administration and school board; and a climate characterized by openness, respect and trust between members of different staff groups.

Studies have clearly demonstrated that better student results are the main indicator of the effectiveness and excellence of schools. It is seen as desirable to establish in schools considered to be "less good" the particular conditions that are found in good schools. However, it appears that these particular conditions derive from something that is deep, fundamental and related to group dynamics which are present. These cannot be replicated elsewhere overnight. It is the product of a "group specific culture", a dynamic based on values, beliefs, rituals and norms. This is called organizational culture.

Currently, educators are interested in organizational culture or the culture of schools. The focus of this interest is to understand the phenomenon in a school environment and its relationship to the performance of members of the school.

The objective of this research is toidentify one or more models of organizational culture. These models specify and organize in a coherent whole the factors contributing to students' success and their commitment to their studies. This applies to both primary and secondary schools, even though only secondary schools were examined in this study.

Definition of the Concept

The notion of culture is familiar to us, however that of organizational culture is less so. It refers to the experience of life in a group, and to the feeling that is born when a person is integrated into a group for a long period of time, within the framework of a common project. This is how one vaguely feels upon entering an establishment such as a school. Indeed, there exists a particular group life which is obvious for people who live in the school.

In attributing meaning and values to the reality that surrounds them, people and groups acquire a way of seeing and understanding things, thus giving themselves a way of acting that they consider normal, that is, which is in agreement with the common vision or culture of the group.

This culture has a history. It is the result of members' experience of the organization and actions taken in the past. All those who join an organization should adapt to the culture of the environment if they are to integrate. This culture is required to change since it is based on the values and meaning that members give to their organization, a meaning that can be redefined as needed.

An organizational culture is usually made up of sub-cultures, indeed even of counter-cultures, that confront each other in order to define reality. The more homogeneous the vision shared by the group and the greater the consensus about certain values, the stronger is the culture.

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Organizational culture thus refers to the particular dynamic that is established in the group, to the relationship between members, to the common vision and language that emerge naturally as soon as members come together in pursuit of common objectives. Organizational culture also includes the idea of common values, ways of thinking shared by the members, norms to which they gradually adhere and which make mutual understanding and daily life easier. Finally, organizational culture is based on a history that contains important and decisive moments for the group, where a meaning for their commitment is found. This animates and inspires the functioning of the group and gives life and meaning to the organizational and administrative processes.

This concept has enabled us to better understand organizations from the point of view of human subjectivity. This subjectivity can create value systems and give meaning and dynamism to these organizations. This concept has also allowed us to better define the essential nature of high performance institutions.

Organization Culture, Motivation and Performance

The current interest in organizational culture originates from Japan, where firms are concerned with maintaining a high level of performance. Theoretically, the relationship between culture and performance is conceptualized as follows: if culture creates strong ties and leads to a common vision shared by all members of an organization, if it brings about greater support for objectives, high performance can be expected.

Organizational Culture and the Educational Mission of the School

Few studies have explored the link between culture and performance in institutions with an educational mission. There is little literature on this subject and the conclusions thus far are preliminary.

Any stable group acquires its own specific culture after a while. Schools possess an organizational culture which determines ways of being and acting. However, the dynamism of this culture varies from one school to another. According to some authors, a strong organizational culture is especially characterized by the dynamism, coherence and articulation of its various components. It gives rise to a greater degree of support for common values and greater commitment to pursuing group objectives.

A strong organizational culture is made up of characteristics such as shared cultural symbols in the organization, the ability of the cultural model to influence the organization's members and a coherent value system to which the group adheres.

School Culture and Leadership

It is the principals' role to promote and develop the school's culture in a given direction. Their influence is exercised through actions and deeds that express the vision of the school, as well as through their management style and the values and symbols put forward.

Organizational Culture and Academic Progress

Few studies have dealt with the relationship between organizational culture and the academic progress of students. This relationship can be understood at a theoretical level. In reality, if the culture creates strong links and a common vision, if it fosters greater support by members for academic goals, better academic results can be expected. To our knowledge, few studies have explored the link between culture and performance on a large scale. Authors who are interested in the culture of schools rely on the observation, which is often made after the fact, that so-called "effective" schools have common cultural characteristics: high expectations; a strong, clear educational project; strong leadership from the administration, etc. The literature dealing with organizational culture is still too recent and not sufficiently developed to draw out definitive conclusions. The present study attempts to increase our understanding of this issue.

In the light of the results of this research, it would appear that the presence of a strong organizational culture in a school, rather than the different models of culture that may exist, account for academic success.

One of our first realizations was of this omnipresent reality in schools. This is a vibrant, cultural reality, which is both revealing and historically rich. The administrators and staff are not always aware of this global cultural reality. The notion of organizational culture can become an important leadership tool within a school environment. While it is a source of stability for the group, it can also underlie

resistance to change, especially for those who are questioning not only the way things are done, but also the beliefs and values adhered to by the group. Any attempt to innovate that does not take the culture of the school into account risks being resisted or simply ignored.

It was found that values and cultural symbols are most shared by the staff in School A. It is in this school that the greatest sense of pride and belonging was evident.

It was found that Schools B and C present interesting aspects in their culture, however support for common values and a strong sense of belonging were not as clearly evident.

Certain practices can work against the development of a school's culture: automatic transfer of administrators, limiting the possibility of acquiring a common vision; the policy of locking doors, limiting the participation in sports and other activities; the presence of security guards, projecting an image of police control; the absence of a gathering place, which would encourage meetings and discussions between members of different staff groups.

In the light of the results of this research, it is possible to establish a link between the academic progress of students and the presence of a strong and dynamic organizational culture, such as the one defined in this study. However, given the paucity of studies carried out in this area, our conclusions should therefore be interpreted cautiously. It appears that a strong organizational culture including a sharing of values and goals, dynamism, commitment and participation, contributes to the achievement of students.

This approach is not intended to be a stopgap measure or a last-minute solution to the problems that schools are currently experiencing. Rather its aim is to revive the school's educational mission. This approach offers the possibility for renewing, if not improving the life and climate of schools.

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The Examples of School Culture

	School A: 1100 Students	School B: 550 Students	School C: 638 Students
Introduction to the School	The school is located in a small village in the heart of a rural region. Its grounds have been well laid out, including a football field, a track and green spaces. The rooms are clean and well-lit and there is a large hall where students can gather. The teaching staff can use a variety of rooms to meet with each other. However, there is no common staff room, each teacher having an assigned classroom where he or she teaches and carries out various school-related tasks. Supervision during the arrival and decparture of students is carried out by the teaching staff. There is no formal control over the comings and goings of visitors. The doors are open from 7:30 a.m. until 11:00 p.m.	This school is situated along a boulevard and is part of a small municipality. The school yard is covered by grass and fenced in, and no other facilities have been added. The school is swallowed up in an anonymous sea of buildings which make up its immediate surroundings. The exterior of the school is similar to that of the hospital next door. There are very few rooms that can be used for gatherings. There are three rooms where the teaching staff can work and meet. Comings and goings in the school are controlled at all times of the day and the premises are supervised by a security guard during school hours. The school is open from 7:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.	Located in an urban environment, the school was built along a noisy main road in the city centre. There is no school yard nor outside facilities. When students arrive and during recess, they gather on the sidewalk since the area behind the building is reserved for parking. The cafeteria is the only place that is large enough to accommodate all the students. Teachers use staff rooms located throughout the two floors, which, like the lounge, are no more than functional. When the school is open, supervision is carried out by the teaching staff and a security guard. There appears to be no strict control over comings and goings. The doors are open from 7:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.
Administration	There are three administrators and 70 teachers. The majority of them have been at the school for many years (the principal has been in his position for 23 years).	The administration team is made up of two people. The principal, who has been in her position since 1988, was vice-principal from 1984 to 1988. Twenty of the school's 39 teachers are new and more than one-quarter are on probation.	The administration team is made up of two people, one of whom is the principal who has been in this position for two years. There are 40 teachers, of whom 24 are not permanent and 14 are on probation.
Curriculum	Secondary levels 1 to 5 courses are offered, leading to either a Secondary School General Diploma or a Secondary School Vocational Diploma. A program of continuous individualized paths for learning is also offered.	The school offers Secondary levels 1 to 5 general program courses. It also offers individualized paths for learning to 1st and 2nd year students and a special education program.	The school offers Secondary levels 1 to 5 general program courses and temporary individualized paths for learning in years 1 and 2. A section of the school accommodates approximately twenty adolescent girls with learning difficulties in years 4 and 5.
Socio-economic Environment	The population is socio-economically disadvantaged. Half of this population is made up of farmers. The presence of small and medium-sized businesses creates seasonal unemployment. The environment can be characterized as traditional even though there are increasing numbers of single-parent families.	The population is considered to be socio-economically disadvantaged. Approximately 50% of the parents are unemployed. The proportion of single-parent families is also about 50%. Part-time work is widespread among students.	The socio-economic level is average and 53% of the families are headed by single parents. Part-time work is not widespread among the students. The school is characterized by a multi-ethnic population and its proximity to private schools.
History of the School	The development of the school has been strongly influenced by its first principal and founder. The current principal succeeded him in 1970 and has devoted himself to maintaining respect and a spirit of mutual help, while softening the operating rules. There have been no major incidents at the school.	It would appear that the history of the school does not seem to have been marked by any individuals in particular. However, there have been both a high turnover of principals, and numerous labour disputes. In the years following the period of labour disputes, the school acquired a reputation as a "graveyard for principals".	The history of the school, which was founded in 1961, has not been influenced by any one individual in particular, although some have left their mark. Of note are a principal and teacher who imparted on the school an orientation which still remains today. They are given credit for the current dynamism of the school. Administrators have changed at regular intervals and have not encountered any major problems.
Prevailing Human and Educational Values Human Values	The prevailing values are generally supported by the staff. These values are characterized by mutual respect and trust, as well as by an openness towards each other. This trust is demonstrated through great flexibility in the assignment of tasks. For example, the various extracurricular activities of the school are entrusted to those who are interested in them. Students and teachers maintain warm and open relationships. The students are generally calm and polite.	There is an effort to promote certain values in the educational project. Notions of respect, achievement and pride are discussed. Teachers are concerned with supporting these values and sharing them with the students. However, based on the behaviour of students, it would appear that even though the message is clear, these values are not expressed spontaneously. Efforts to integrate them into the daily life of the students are ongoing.	The school is characterized by cultural diversity and an openness to the arts (approximately 15 nationalities are represented there). It appears that this racial mix and the socio-economic differences that exist among students do not pose problems at the school. The school does not experience any vandalism or racial conflicts. Given this cultural diversity, the school has emphasized tolerance and self and mutual respect. The school copes with both the advantages and inconveniences of this heterogeneity.
Educational Values	Education involves encouraging students to use their potential fully; co-operation rather than competition is encouraged even though administrators' and teachers' expectations about academic achievement are high. Each year an awards ceremony is held in order to give recognition to students who have distinguished themselves as much by their academic performance as by their effort and improvement.	The first principle of the educational project is to encourage achievement beyond learning. However, even though this principle is supported unanimously, in reality it is applied with differing degrees of success. Competition is not a value that is upheld up by the school other than in sports activities, which appear to be very popular with students. The value placed on sports activities is not considered by the administration to be a concern of the educational project. An awards ceremony is held at the end of the year giving recognition to attendance, effort and improvement of one's average.	Academic achievement and autonomy are values lauded by the school. The combination of co-operation and competition which prevails in the school produces good results. Giftedness has been rejected as a value that gives rise to individualism and elitism. The school has developed a policy of recognition which is revised annually. The awards ceremony, which seeks to encourage and reward students as much for their academic performance as for their general conduct, is in line with this philosophy.
Team Spirit and Conflict Resolution	The importance given to the values of mutual help and co-operation encourages team spirit and a sense of belonging. As soon as conflict arises, the administration intervenes immediately to sort out the problem. "We talk about it." These are relationships beyond those of a professional nature which exist among staff members.	Relations are good overall, but some cliques do exist. Dissatisfaction and constant criticism on the part of a small group of teachers must be contended with. Its effect on other teachers and students could be negative. The individualism which has existed for some years and is associated with the arrival of teachers with irregular employment status is also a factor.	Presently, the school is going through a period of transition associated with changes in personnel due to retirements. The irregular employment status of many teachers reduces their commitment to the school. This type of situation has a negative impact on continuity and on the enhancement of a sense of belonging. On the other hand, through the parents' committee, parents exert pressure on the school to ensure that all activities have educational value. Although there is no open conflict, this situation creates a tense atmosphere.
Evidence of the School's Cultural Life	The school has a varied cultural life. A great number of social, artistic, cultural and sports	The school offers students guidance and supervision in a variety of sports, cultural and	Several sports, cultural and enrichement activities are offered to students. However, the par-

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	activities and various workings for students are offered at different times of the day. These are well attended. The social club for the school staff plays an important role in maintaining group spirit. A high level of participation shows how important the club is for the school.	social activities. The low level of participation in all but the sports activities is generally by everyone. Students' lack of interest and the fact that a great number of them work part-time can account for the low participation rates. Furthermore, the lack of meeting places and the faulty heating system, which manifested itself during certain periods of the year, discourage attendance at these activities.	tication level is low. On the other hand, some festive events are very popular and enjoy great success. In general, teachers participate in activities prepared for and by students and do not hesitate to help out with preparations. However, few social activities are organized by the different staff groups at the school.
Sense of Belonging and Satisfaction	Remarks by teachers and students reflect great pride in belonging to the school and pleasure in being there. For many of them, the school is a pleasant place to meet and work.	It is difficult to detect a sense of belonging in this school. Despite obvious differences of opinion among members of the teaching staff about teaching, co-operation is good. For students, any sense of belonging relates mainly to good times and having fun.	The poor reputation that the school has acquired over the years, the absence of a gathering place, and the constant comparison of the school with the private sector are all factors that have worked against the development of a sense of belonging among both students and teachers. Moreover, teachers are rarely present at the school once work is finished.
Nicknaming and Interpersonal Relations	Relationships between staff members are warm, and those between teachers and administrators are friendly and harmonious. They are calm and cordial between students.	There is evidence of solidarity among teachers, however there appear to be few personal contacts. The administration is viewed as competent and open, but is challenged by some. Relations among students are strained, and the relationship between the staff and students is fragile, but is marked with a degree of mutual respect.	Relationships are open between people in the same department, but otherwise they are either non-existent or superficial. The words "trust" and "satisfaction" are used to describe relations with the administration. There is good communication between teachers and students. Relations among students are cordial.
School Image	In general, teachers, administrators and students are aware of the quality of life within the school and its environment. The warmth of the environment and the quality of life convey a picture of a harmonious family.	The images used by students and teachers to describe their school are contradictory. They range from that of a family, a daycare, a public place and a shopping centre. These perceptions range from a sense of belonging to one of disillusionment.	The active and dynamic aspect of the urban environment is noted, as well as the heterogeneous nature of the school, given the presence of numerous ethnic groups.
Leadership	Leadership is based on trust and mutual respect. In the eyes of the teaching staff, the administration is a flexible team which allows a great deal of autonomy and is in touch with employees. However, the staff would like to have more support. Although some staff members are critical of the leadership, there do not appear to be any serious challenges to it.	Despite a degree of individualism and limited commitment among some members of the teaching staff, a spirit of co-operation does exist between the administration and staff. The principal's high level of involvement in the educational project and the emphasis put on pedagogy and the quality of French mother tongue partly explain why the staff feel valued and supported. The administration has gradually made its presence known and the teaching staff see them as the only support on which they can count.	The leadership style is discreet and low-profile. Both accessibility and availability take precedence over visibility. The establishment of participatory management is important for the principal. In general, the teachers feel that they are listened to and supported by the administration. The students do not feel they have strong ties to the administration because of the latter's low-profile approach.
Educational Project	The school's main goal is *"to provide students with a healthy environment in which human relations and social activities are honored. A stimulating social environment is a prerequisite for satisfactory academic performance."* The school therefore aims to encourage harmonious and friendly relations among teachers, administrators and students. Social activities are popular and the school tries to guarantee a quality of life that is conducive to motivation and success.	One of the achievements of the new administration and its teaching staff has been to introduce an educational project. The educational project recommends activities focused on communication, academic achievement and respect. Respect remains the major concern of the administration. The school defines itself as, *"an environment, a team, a family. We are proud of the services offered; we provide quality teaching in a reassuring environment."*	The general aim of the educational project is expressed as follows: *"the school does its utmost to develop pride in the expression of the student's intellectual and personal resources."* This goal is pursued through the promotion of certain values, such as **Instruction**, which means awareness of academic requirements; **Education**, which is achieved by learning to be autonomous; and **Respect**, which means being aware of the diversity and differences that exist in the school. The educational project appears to work best with respect to the right to be different and to have that difference respected.
Academic Progress	Academic achievement is relatively high in this school. It is attributed to a fairly stable family environment, steady work by the students, the approach used by teachers, the quality of teaching and the school's particular characteristics. The teachers invest considerable effort in maintaining good relations with the students and do not hesitate to give them extra time. It is explained that failures and dropouts are due, among other things, to difficulty in motivating some students who live only for the present without concern for the future.	Academic achievement is attributed to sound discipline, guidance and supervision provided to students. Even if it is thought that the dropout and failure rate is not higher than elsewhere, the teaching staff are aware of the difficulties experienced by youth. According to the staff, several external factors, including the environment and the lack of motivation to study, can affect achievement. Another factor is the importance given to sports and part-time work by young people. They deplore the fact that parents participate very little in school projects.	The school's administration and orientation committee emphasize the importance of family support for academic achievement. According to them, the family holds the key to the student's success, and, by this very fact, is the reason for failure and dropout. According to the teachers, besides the family, the little support given students by the school environment can also account in part for academic failure and dropout. Pedagogical approaches of a co-operative nature as well as the policy in favour of valorization of school could encourage achievement.
What Students Think About Their School	Students are proud to belong to this school. There is a good social life and good relations with the teachers. The students think of the teachers as "good and available". School life is characterized by many social activities that are greatly appreciated. There is a certain ambivalence towards rules: there are either too many or not enough. In general, the students appreciate their relationship with the teachers and the prevailing climate of harmony and trust within the school.	The administration appears to be well accepted by students, but the teaching staff are not approved of unanimously. Students are critical of the way teaching is organized; they complain that there is very little team work. There emerges a feeling of indifference to the school in general and, in particular, to the need to identify themselves with their own school. The fact that the school has as poor reputation on the outside appears to influence their judgment. Beyond the usual complaints of students, there is a certain resignation to the school situation by the students.	The students' comments about their school are generally positive. Relations with the administration tend to be distant and cold; however, there is general satisfaction with the teaching staff. The school's regulations are not really challenged and are even considered *all right*. For most of the students, a post-secondary education is a normal part of their educational path. In general, they value the absence of racism, the small size of the school and the fact that co-operation rather than competition is encouraged.
Data of the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec	Average marks scored by students are higher than the provincial results, with the exception of English second language (*Anglais, compréhension orale et écrite 136-580*), for which the results are either the same or slightly lower. Pass rates are higher than the provincial rates in all subjects. The graduation rate is at the 72nd percentile.	Average marks scored by students at the school are lower than the provincial results, with the exception of writing in French mother tongue (*Français écrit 132-560*) for which the marks are higher. The pass rate for French writing, which is 26 % higher than the provincial results, is the only pass rate above the provincial average. The graduation rate is at the 6th percentile.	Marks scored by students are comparable to the provincial averages, although in some cases they are slightly lower. The graduation rate is at the 25th percentile.

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